

Interview – Gabriel Passetti

Written by E-International Relations

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Gabriel Passetti is an Associate Professor of History of International Relations at Universidade Federal Fluminense (Brazil). He received his doctorate in Social History from Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil) with a dissertation about the uses of the military to occupy lands from native peoples in Argentina and New Zealand, which received the Brazilian CAPES National Prize. He is author of the book *Indigenous and Creole: politics, war and betrayal in the struggles in southern Argentina (1852-1885)* (available in Portuguese) and several articles about the British Empire and Argentine conflicts with native peoples. Currently his research focuses on South America and international politics in the late 19th century.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The history of International Relations is a field with some very interesting debates nowadays, after the incorporation of new questions, new methodologies and theories. The close debate with comparative, transnational and global histories, as well as with feminism and post-colonialism, brings new and interesting approaches to how states interacted, how power affected people and societies in different ways and how possibilities of action, reaction, alliance or refusal were so complex. We are researching how global processes affect different societies, how politicians, diplomats, military and intellectuals debated and responded to events, processes and wars in other places. For example, politicians in the Empire of Brazil were very interested in the American Civil War and the military tactics used, which were applied to the Paraguay War. Brazil also looked to the USA to learn how to proceed with slavery. At the same time, Argentines were debating how the British were fighting native peoples within their Empire, in preparation for an attack on the native peoples of Southern Argentina.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Brazilians often understand themselves as different from Latin Americans. When I was an undergraduate student, I had classes with Professor Maria Ligia Coelho Prado, who became my Masters and PhD supervisor at Universidade de São Paulo, on Latin American History. The comparisons and connections she established between Brazil and other countries were fundamental in showing me how we can think about pluralities, singularities and similarities, and to see Brazil as part of Latin America. During this process, I explored the fields of Anthropology and Political Science, I looked at how to analyze subaltern peoples' political activities, specifically indigenous peoples. Renewed Political History, which refers to the post 1970s period that abandoned earlier approaches that held the White male perspective in high esteem, opened up new fields and possibilities to research Latin American History and to understand its peoples.

What were the characteristics of inter-American relations during the 19th century?

We can identify three major characteristics of inter-American relations during the 19th century, all of which are connected. The first is the conflicts related to the building and consolidation of states in the region. All of them asked for jurisdiction based on former colonial territories, but there were major debates – and some conflicts – over the control of areas that, in the past, may have corresponded with different colonial authorities. In the peripheral areas of the European Empires, there were few interests and little information from the ground, so when the new states began

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to compete for borders, they faced many disputes on the interpretation of where the control of one colonial authority ended.

There was also a juxtaposition between military, colonial and Church authorities. When new states established new interests in a region, especially economic ones, they tried to find any colonial historical document to claim their sovereignty, which led to disputes, and sometimes war. As the new states were constructions of diverging and competing elites, there were also many cases of fragmented states, such as Bolivar's *Gran Colombia*, divided in the 1830's into Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. Another case is The Federal Republic of Central America, dismembered in the same decade into what is nowadays Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Another symbolical situation was on the Plata basin, where the colonial Viceroyalty of River Plate was split between Uruguay, Paraguay, parts of Bolivia, and Argentina. Argentina also faced possible fragmentation and secession for a long time. This is the second characteristic of inter-American relations of that time: the many possibilities, debates and disputes over political structure. Before the states were established, there were many projects focused on confederations and federations clashing with others about unionism and the rule of one major city. Domestic and international politics ran together, the consolidation of states occurred simultaneously with the proposal of major or minor confederations.

The third characteristic is the connection to other international systems. While the inter-American system was being built with the slow integration of the Empire of Brazil and the United States into the system of Spanish Republics, there were always strong interactions with Europeans. This was reflected in pressures to open markets, abolish slavery, attempts to annexe land from the former metropolis, and a dispute over capital and immigrants by the new states.

How do the territorial conflicts between Argentina, Brazil and Chile during the 19th century affect their bilateral relations today?

These disputes are no longer a question for bilateral relations nowadays. Brazil and Argentina, and Argentina and Chile, are now strong commercial partners, but cultural, economic and political rivalries are present, though not around territorial claims. Brazil and Argentina's last dispute was finalised by the arbitration of the President of the USA in 1895. Argentina and Chile do have a disputed border. During the second half of the 19th century, both claimed Patagonia and a treaty was formed in 1881, but this did not solve the situation. Arbitration of this dispute by the British Queen was questioned by Argentina for some time due to the ongoing dispute over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. Eventually, after many negotiations, the third longest border in the world was established. In the late 1970s the Argentine dictatorial government claimed sovereignty over some small islands to the south in the Beagle Channel, in a crisis that almost put them to war with the Chilean dictator Pinochet. Pope John Paul II arbitrated the dispute and since then there have been strong efforts towards economic and cultural integration. Border disputes are currently a theme associated with rightwing nationalism and criminal dictatorships. In Argentina it is also associated with the Malvinas War.

How did the expansion of the British Empire affect diplomatic relations with South America?

The great power of the 19th century – the British empire – had many and sometimes concurrent policies regarding South America. Capitalists and the military were present in every country. Diplomats had a strong influence in local politics, since, at that time, they were key people to the processes of independence around the continent – always pressing for open markets. There were also acts of power from the British Navy in the region, such as their role in guaranteeing Uruguay's independence. In this instance, diplomacy failed to establish a favourable situation for Britain's economic interests and it was the war between the Empire of Brazil and Buenos Aires, when diplomats and military were active in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, which ultimately resulted in Uruguay's independence in 1828. In the same region, in the 1840s, the Royal Navy made an alliance with France, blocking ports to try to open navigation through the rivers by force. Simultaneously, there were strong acts to end the Atlantic slave trade in Brazil, resulting in strong hostility between the British and the Brazilian Empires and the closing of diplomatic relations in the 1860s. In addition to these acts of force, British economic expansion was considerable throughout the century. Mid way through the century, after the consolidation of states in the region, there were many

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opportunities for British capital investment in urban and transport infrastructure, ports and banking, establishing strong economic links up until World War I. We can conclude that formal annexation by the British only occurred on the Falkland Islands and other small islands close to Antarctica, so the region was integrated into the British Empire through economic links.

What is the current reading of Britain's role in the Paraguayan War, fought between Paraguay and the Triple Alliance of Argentina, the Empire of Brazil, and Uruguay (1864-1870)?

The modern historiography on the Paraguayan War analyses it as a clash between regional groups with strong links in Uruguay, Argentina, and Southern Brazil and, of course, Paraguay. British diplomacy was not interested in a war that would destabilize a region where its investors were seeking opportunities and its formal connections to the Empire of Brazil were closed at the beginning of the conflict. In the 1970s, some historians analyzed the war as a British imperialistic war, referencing US contemporary interventions in the Cold war in Latin America, but archive research has dismantled this version of events.

What caused the conflicts between the Maori peoples and the British in New Zealand between 1840-1870?

The British arrived in New Zealand in the late 18th century, but up until the 1830s they were restricted to small posts on the shores and a village in the Northern zone. After a controversial treaty with native Chiefs regarding the annexation of the islands to the Empire, colonization companies began sending immigrants and there were soon claims between the Chiefs and the British about land usage. Colonists established on that contact zone of the Imperial expansion wanted a new life with standards they would never have in a metropolis, making life more prosperous and with new opportunities for economic growth. They wanted land and also to rule; they intended to be the masters in New Zealand, but the continuous resistance by the Maori people made it difficult for them. Confronting peoples who did not intend to sell land, or to accept a subaltern position, the British tried to displace them by force, which started a cycle of violence. The interesting point was that violence was what they wanted, so they could present the "barbarism" of the native peoples and justify requests for reinforcements of imperial troops for a final clash with the Chiefs. So, the conflicts between the Maori peoples and the British in New Zealand were not only about land, but mainly about rule and sovereignty. Under constant attack by the colonists, the Maori Chiefs united and called a Maori King, which was seen by the British Governor as an attack on Queen Victoria. When the colonists successfully reported news of violence and death to the metropolis, the idea of an imminent threat to the British Empire's sovereignty in the region formed, resulting in the mobilization of troops to execute an enormous military operation that guaranteed British rule in the 1860s. This operation wiped out many Maori in the name of defending British territory. In my PhD thesis, I called this process "the colonization of barbarianism", the use of discourse by colonists to transform the native peoples into "barbarians" that should and must be eliminated.

What are the challenges of studying the history of international relations in Brazil? What are the broader challenges you face when using historical sources in your work?

The history of IR is a peripheral field in Brazil. While internationalists usually focus on contemporary themes, many historians still see the area as old diplomatic history. This situation has been changing through the actions of individuals and groups spread across the country, many of them researching themes such as the Cold War and dictatorships, or the age of the new republic. The broader challenges when using historical sources are the access to the archives (the Brazilian Diplomatic Historic Archive is well-structured to receive researchers) and the time it takes to read and give a proper analysis to a number of sources – in my case these sources are handwritten. If somebody is interested in an analysis that include the archives from another country, they may face bureaucratic difficulties (as many documents are confidential) as well as difficulties covering travel expenses as the Brazilian government has undergone considerable cuts in research.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

International Relations, and the history of IR, are interesting fields and include many topics that warrant further

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discussion. It is important not to be so focused on one specific matter. It is interesting to read different theories, methodologies, and topics that may call attention to themes to be explored in the area, so have an open mind to new opportunities to change. Understand where you are writing and researching to and from. It is a different challenge to research the history of IR from South America, than the history of IR in the USA or Western Europe. Bring this “Global South” perspective to your research, even if dealing with “Global North” themes: they are strong contributions.